



Institute on Religion and Public Policy:

Religious Freedom in Greece

Executive Summary

The Constitution of Greece begins by asserting that the state's principal duty is to protect and respect the "value of the human being." Although the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ is the state-recognized religion and religion of the prevailing majority of Greek citizens, the Constitution provides for freedom of religion and stipulates that religious adherence will not stand in the way of any citizen enjoying civil rights and liberties. In addition to the Greek Orthodox religion, there are two other recognized religions in Greece, Islam and Judaism. The adherents of these three religions are known as "legal persons of public law," whereas all other religious believers are "legal persons of private law." Only "legal persons of public law" are allowed to build "houses of prayer." There is a high degree of legal favoritism and discrimination aimed towards religious minorities. The manifestation of these discriminatory policies ranged from government-allocated spending to the Greek Orthodox Church to religious instruction in school and "punitive" alternative service terms for conscientious objectors. Anti-Semitism in Greece is growing at an alarming rate with the addition of 10 parliamentary seats belonging to the People's Orthodox Rally (LAOS party) in Greece.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to the Legal Situation

Article 2 of the Constitution of Greece states that the primary obligations of the state are "respect and protection of the value of the human being." Article 4 further guarantees that all Greeks are "equal before the law."

Article 13 proclaims: "All known religions shall be free and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of the law, the practice of rites of worship is not allowed to offend public order or the good usages,"

proselytism is prohibited; and the ministers of all known religions shall be subject to the same supervision by the State and to the same obligations toward it as those of the prevailing religion.” Additionally, Article 13 establishes the freedom of religious conscience stating that the “enjoyment of civil rights and liberties does not depend on the individual’s religious beliefs.”

Article 5 establishes additional individual civil rights. Greek citizens are given the right to “develop freely their personality and to participate in the social, economic and political life of the country” and “enjoy full protection of their life, honor and liberty irrespective of nationality, race or language and of religious or political beliefs.”

There are, however, problems found within the Constitution. Article 3 simultaneously establishes a state church at the expense of others while legally mandating doctrinal and organizational rules upon the Church. According to Article 3, Section 1, “The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. The Orthodox Church of Greece, acknowledging our Lord Jesus Christ as its head, is inseparably united in doctrine with the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople and with every other Church of Christ of the same doctrine, observing unwaveringly, as they do, the holy apostolic and synodal canons and sacred traditions.” Article 3, Section 3 limits the ability of religious communities to translate religious texts mandating that “the text of the Holy Scripture shall be maintained unaltered. Official translation of the text into any other form of language, without prior sanction by the Autocephalous Church of Greece and the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, is prohibited.”

As the official church of the country of Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church enjoys certain political and economic privileges that other religions do not. The Orthodox Church has close ties to the Ministry of Education and Religion when it comes to administrative matters. It is mandated that all Orthodox students receive Orthodox religious instruction in “public, primary, and secondary schools.” Non-Orthodox students do not have to undergo this instruction, however, they are not provided with alternative teachers specific to their religion. Nonetheless, non-Orthodox parents have reported that their children were forced to take classes taught by Orthodox instructors. Additionally, government-approved textbooks have, in the past, included slanderous text regarding non-Orthodox religions.

The Greek government allocates funds to pay for the training and salaries of the Orthodox clergy, as well as the upholding of Orthodox Church buildings. The government not only pays the salaries of Greek Orthodox officials, but also pays the salaries of the three Muslim muftis (religious leaders) in Thrace (an area in Greece in which the Muslim minority is protected under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne). Rabbis do not benefit from any government-allocated payment. The Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece has put in a request for salary

payment based on the need for “equal treatment from the government” but the government claims to have never received their petition.

The three religions granted legal status, Orthodox, Islam, and Judaism, are the only religions to have “houses of prayer.” All other religious communities cannot own property as a “religious entity” but instead, the property must be under a “specifically created legal entity rather than the religious body itself.” As members of minority religions classified as “legal persons of private law,” they cannot be represented in a court of law as religious entities.

Several minority religious communities have reported that opening any house of worship has been difficult if not impossible. Scientologists have yet to secure a permit to build a house of prayer, despite a struggle that has lasted more than seven years. In 2000, the Church of Scientology applied to be recognized as a religion and be granted a permit but were turned down on the basis that they were “not a religion.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have submitted five requests for a house of prayer permit since 2005.

The Greek Constitution includes prohibitions that limit the free practice of religious expression and belief that contravene international and European human rights standards. Article 13, Section 2 states: “All known religions shall be free and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of the law. The practice of rites of worship is not allowed to offend public order or the good usages. Proselytism is prohibited.” This ban has affected members of such minority religious communities as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Proselytizing is considered a crime and punishable by law, with those convicted serving jail sentences. In fact, Greece is the only member of the European Union to have a Constitutional ban on proselytism.

One form of legal religious discrimination comes in the form of alternative terms of mandatory national service for conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors are made to serve in state hospitals or “municipal and public services” for a term that is two times that of the required military service, resulting in a length of service equaling 23 months.

Non-Orthodox citizens have reported that they have been confronted with career limitations based on religious affiliation. They face limitations in the military, as well as police and fire-fighting forces and civil service industry. Within the military, officers are typically Orthodox, an obstacle that has led some minorities to declare themselves Orthodox in order to have the opportunity for advancement. In 2007, based on Muslim under-representation in Thrace, the government mandated that a system would be instituted to fill 0.5 percent of civil service positions with Muslims. The system has yet to be implemented.

Anti-Semitism in Greece

Anti-Semitism is a continual societal problem in Greece perpetuated by government agencies, politicians, and the media. There are reports of state orchestrated Anti-Semitic events. In the 2007 election, an anti-Semitic right wing party gained 10 seats in Parliament. Major Greek periodicals publish anti-Semitic cartoons and depictions. There have been reports of vandalism and desecration of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries.

The Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece and the GHM are in a continued struggle against the traditional burning of a "life-size effigy of Judas" on Easter that is often referred to as the "burning of the Jew" performed by such state agencies as the Athens New Agency, the National Tourism Organization, and Agrotouristiki.

In September 2007, the People's Orthodox Rally (LAOS Party) in Greece won 10 seats in Parliament, representing 3.8% of the vote. The party has been deemed nationalistic, xenophobic, and above all, anti-Semitic. The party says there is a "global domination of Zionism." The party's weekly publication, the *A1*, has repeatedly printed anti-Semitic editorials, articles and cartoons, including such articles accusing the Israelis of genocide against the Lebanese people. The leader of the party is Giorgos Karatzaferis. Karatzaferis has described the party as a "pre-dictatorship Right." Karatzaferis has publicly denounced the Holocaust as a Jewish myth and, in a speech delivered after the September 11th attacks, stated his belief that the Jewish people were behind the attacks.

Within the mainstream press, there are many accounts of anti-Semitism in cartoons and editorials. On August 18, 2007, a cartoon appeared in the second-largest daily newspaper, the *Eleftherotypia* depicting an Israeli soldier "praying with a rifle that was firing swastikas."

There have also been reported instances of vandalism and desecration of Jewish monuments and structures. In March 2007, a Jewish cemetery outside of Ioannina was vandalized with swastikas. The previous month, a synagogue that is no longer in Veria found swastikas painted on the exterior. According to Worldwide Religious News, a group of vandals attacked another Jewish cemetery located in Ioannina, Greece in June, 2009. Fortunately, regional authorities addressed the incident promptly.

Other Instances of Religious Discrimination/Religious Unrest

In May 2009, Worldwide Religious News reported that a Koran was deliberately destroyed by an Athens policeman during a routine check. As a result, hundreds of Muslims protested in the streets of Athens; riot police responded by using tear gas on the gathered crowd. Despite the physicality of the clash, no major injuries were reported.

Conclusion

Greece's treatment of religious minorities is incompatible with international norms. Urgent measures must be taken to ensure that minority religions have equal rights and that Greece is in compliance with international conventions and treaties ensuring religious freedom. The favoritism shown towards the Greek Orthodox Church at the expense of religious minorities of all faiths must cease. With only three legal, public religions existing in the nation, those with "private" status must fight an uphill battle just to have a place to worship publicly. Additionally, laws such as the government-imposed ban on proselytizing, which restrict religious communities from practicing and expressing their religious beliefs, must be repealed. Measures need to be taken to ensure that all religious communities have the ability to establish houses of worship. The government must end practices, such as "The Burning of the Jew," which encourage societal anti-Semitism, discrimination, and violence. The alternative terms for conscientious objectors are punitive, unfair, and need to be re-examined. In addition, the favoritism shown toward the Greek Orthodox in education and employment needs to be rectified.